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## **Celebrity Worship as Parareligion: Bieber and the Beliebers**

*Pete Ward: Durham University and MF The Norwegian School of Theology*

They were trying to carry on as if it was just a normal day at the Lutheran Seminary. Students training for the ministry attended their classes in the usual way but the noise coming from outside was starting to make things difficult. There had been a warning that there might be some disruption but the reality was still quite overwhelming. It was the day when Justin Bieber was to stop off in Oslo for a special performance. The televised special was to be filmed in a student venue right next door to the Norwegian School of Theology and as a result the ministerial students found themselves staring out of the windows at a different kind of devotion altogether. This was the event that was to make international headlines in 2015 because after just one song, a stripped down version of his song 'Boyfriend', Bieber stormed off stage leaving the fans both inside and outside the venue distraught.<sup>i</sup>

### **Biebermania**

The kind of fan chaos that took place in Oslo has characterized Justin Bieber's career from the very start.<sup>ii</sup> It's crazy but it is 'Biebermania' the singer explained when asked by local television about a particularly chaotic appearance at a Mall in 2009.<sup>iii</sup> The events in Oslo and elsewhere are not unusual. In fact it is not entirely an accident that Bieber's fans have developed a particular connection to their idol such that they cause a disturbance where-ever he appears. A particular 'intimacy' with the singer has been cultivated and encouraged by his use of social media. Almost from the start he adopted a strategy of connecting directly with his fan base using Youtube, Instagram and Twitter. In 2016 he had over 75 million followers on Twitter making him the second most followed person on the social networking site after Katy Perry. Bieber said that he sees the internet as the 'best way to reach your fans' and he uses his account to both promote his music and to offer a reaction to events and situations in his professional and personal life'.<sup>iv</sup>

Justin Bieber's fans have adopted the term 'Belieber' to describe their devotion to the Canadian singer. The name encapsulates the dynamics of celebrity worship by merging Bieber happily with the word believer. A Belieber according to Chas Newkey-Burden is someone who 'believes in Justin, a Bieberholic someone who is addicted to the Bieb'.<sup>v</sup> The term Blieber neatly articulates with the pop song 'I'm a believer' first performed by another teen sensation the Monkees. This has led to fan merchandise such as the 'I'm a Belieber T-shirt' and the Facebook page 'Then I saw his face now I'm a beleiber'.<sup>vi</sup>



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In 2012 after a flash mob event the German magazine *Newstars* recorded a Youtube video with the title I'm a Belieber video performed by German fans of the singer.<sup>viii</sup> The lyrics reflect the devotion of these fans in the face of their perception of general disapproval of their attachment to the singer.

'They say that I should better  
Stay away from you oh baby  
They say that i should better  
Learn for school all night and day  
They say that you are so untouchable  
And i won't reach you

But i say NO NO,NO,NO NO,NO,NO – because  
I'm a Belieber  
Let's say hello  
Here come the Beliebers'  
1, 2, 3, 4 Beliebers go.'<sup>ix</sup>

Devotion here is presented as transgressive.<sup>x</sup> It is an act of defiant faith. Belief, according to the pop music critic Ben Rayner is a central tenant of the Justin Bieber mythology.<sup>xi</sup> Believe was the title of Bieber's third studio album, and of his second world tour that started in 2012. Beliebers, he argues, are expected to have faith, faith that one day they might have Justin as their boyfriend. Rayner observes that of course as this isn't going to happen, but "Faith in the illogical is a big part of worship, though, and in a culture where celebrity worship has arguably become religion for many people it's perfectly logical that the question should be asked again and again: "Are you still a Belieber?"<sup>xii</sup> It was precisely this Biebermania that came onto the streets in Oslo.

### **Celebrity Worship**

The encounter between seminary students and Belieber's encapsulates a key dynamic in the study of religion and popular culture. On one side of the window there are those who are being inducted into a formal and authorized religious life in the ministry and on the other there is the deregulated personalized devotion of the Beliebers. The use of religious language to describe the relationship between fans and celebrities has become commonplace. Pop singers are regularly referred to as icons or idols. Musicians are Rock Gods and opera singers are Divas. The relationship between celebrities and their followers is routinely described as worship part of the cult of celebrity. The word 'fan' has religious roots it comes from the latin *fanaticus*, meaning "of the temple": so the fan is one who is excessively enthusiastic or taken up with a zeal that is most usually seen in religious fervour.<sup>xiii</sup> As is evident with the examples so far given Fan culture itself is not immune to the borrowing of religious language. Wearing an 'I'm a Belieber' t-shirt is a statement of identity and devotion and it appears that for some fans it is an act of defiance in the face of it disapproval and even perhaps ridicule in some social settings.

The connection between celebrity and religion is more than a discursive trope in popular media or in fan cultures. In academic literature it has become commonplace interpretative category. Roland Barthes' essay on the face of Greta Garbo in *Mythologies* speaks of the image as divinization. "The name given her, the divine, probably aimed to convey less a superlative state of beauty than the essence of her corporeal person, descended from a heaven where things are formed and perfected in the clearest light"<sup>xiv</sup> In 1958 Malcolm Boyd used very similar language speaking of the metamorphosis of stars into a pantheon of legends in his ground breaking book *Christ and the Celebrity Gods*.<sup>xv</sup> The religious significance of celebrity culture is frequently connected in academic literature to a perceived decline in formal religion. Celebrity icons, says Gary Laderman, 'arouse the religious passions of followers in modern society.' With the 'stranglehold of mainline protestantism' on public life on the wane and individuals growing more distant from God celebrities offer a source of 'spiritual meaning, personal fulfilment, and awe inspiring motivation.' (Laderman *Sacred Matters* p64) 'The decline of formal religious traditions forms the backdrop to Chris Rojek's argument concerning the re-articulation of fragmented religious sensibilities, behaviours, and rituals around mass media celebrities. What emerges, he says, is a new kind of cultic worship where celebrities take on a

shamanic character in media representation and in fan cultures replacing traditional religious sources of identity and authority.<sup>xvi</sup> The worship of celebrity bringing rise to new kind of religion is explored in depth by the film critic Edgar Morin.

'Worshipped as heroes, divinized, the stars are more than objects of admiration. They are also subjects of a cult. A religion in embryo has formed around them. This religion diffuses its frenzies over most of the globe. No one who frequents the dark auditoriums is really an atheist. But among the movie going masses can be distinguished the sect of the faithful who wear relics and otherwise consecrate them selves to worship, the fanatics, the fans'.<sup>xvii</sup>

For Morin the cult of the stars has become something more like a religious system with Gods and Goddesses, temples and worshippers. This is a more developed religious framing of celebrity than for instance Rojek or Laderman's sense that religious behavior and sensibilities are becoming rearticulated in popular culture as more traditional religious forms are in decline. Here celebrity represents a reformulation in fragmented form of the sacred. The use of religious metaphors and analogies by the media and also by fans themselves is suggestive that something along the lines of a shifting religious sensibility is taking place. At the same time the relationships that are generated between celebrities and fans are shaped in ways that are distinctive and particular, such that they may not perhaps be quite as reverent as might be expected from true worshippers.

### **Bieber and the Believers**

The chance encounter between seminary students and Beliebers encapsulates the issues around the nature of religion associated with celebrity worship. What is at stake is not simply a two way dynamic with traditional religion on one side and a new fragmented and embryonic spirituality of the fans on the other. Justin Bieber can be read as a significant complicating factor around the possible religious significance of celebrity culture.

In recent years there have been a number of media stories that report that Justin Bieber has embraced the Christian faith. In the title track 'Purpose' he speaks of giving his heart into the hands of God so his soul can be kept. This is a God who is not hard to reach who forgives sins and blesses with the best gift. This is the gift of purpose. At the end of the song Bieber offers a personal message.

'You can't be hard on yourself

For these were the cards that you were given so you have to understand that these, like...

That's not who you are

You're trying to be the best you can be but that's all you can do

If you don't give it all you got, you're only cheating yourself

Give it all you got

But if it ends up happening, it ends up happening.

That's what it's....that's what's happening with me

It's like God I'm giving it all I got, sometimes  
I'm weak and I'm gonna do it, and it's like I'm not giving myself grace  
I'm just like understanding, that's just how it is.<sup>xviii</sup>

Here Bieber offers both advice and apology to his listeners. Faith is offered as part of the struggle. According to the singer sometimes 'it happens' that things don't work out as they should but despite his weakness he still offers himself to God. The 'you' addressed in this voice operates at a number of levels. On the face of it this is a personal confession. The various problems and scrapes that Justin Bieber has found himself dealing with have are close to the surface in this acknowledgement of failing. But the 'you' here also functions to make this a word of counsel for his fans. The 'you' then connotes a sense that fans and singer are part of a similar struggle and it is from this position of apparently acknowledging his own problems that Bieber offers the advice 'If you don't give it all you got, you're only cheating yourself, give it all you got.' Sharing his Christian faith with his fans has become a frequent event for Justin Bieber. He has used his Instagram account to post a series of bible studies for his followers.<sup>xix</sup> The concerts on the 'Purpose' tour have also cultivated a religious atmosphere such that some critics have observed that they appear now to resemble something akin to a Christian worship service.

Justin Bieber's advocacy of evangelical Christianity is perhaps not as unexpected as it might at first appear. His mother was a committed Christian who prayed that her son would one day become a youth pastor or a Christian recording artist.<sup>xx</sup> On his early tours he regularly would pray backstage before performing. (Shapiro p 4) The evangelical commitments of the singer have given a new orientation to his interaction with fans such that he not only advocates faith as a way of life but he also addresses the apparent worship that many Beliebers seem to manifest. Justin is concerned that he is not worthy of faith "I would really suggest to people, 'Don't put your faith in me'. Because I'm gonna disappoint you every time.'<sup>xxi</sup> The singer is here again aware of his failings but he also wants to make it clear that he is not worthy of worship because he is no sense divine.

"But I want them to know that I'm not going to be able to solve their problems. I'm not that higher power. I'll never be. I'm not perfect. I've made so many mistakes. I just want to get to a place where... I just want people to know humans aren't meant to be worshipped. We're just not. So when a human is being worshipped, this is dangerous. 'Cause it does nothing but give you pride."<sup>xxii</sup>

Bieber's insistence that human beings should not be worshipped is an interesting contribution to the debate around celebrity worship. His objection is theological at root. To worship human beings, he says, is not only ineffectual it is dangerous because of the effect that it has in generating pride. This pride is not so much a problem for the fan as it is for the celebrity themselves. Yet at the same time that he is objecting to the celebrity worship of his fans his twitter messages maintain the semi-religious language of the Belieber. So on the occasion of the Grammys in 2016 Justin Bieber's account tweeted a celebratory message to his followers. 'Belieber's. We did it' I love you. Now get ready for the show. Not done yet.'



Justin Bieber @justinbieber · Feb 15

Beliebers.. We did it! I love you. Now get ready for the show. Not done yet.

#GRAMMYS



160K



220K



This juxtaposition of simultaneously warning against celebrity worship and yet also seeming to encourage it exists at a number of levels in fan worship. Fans themselves are often critical of overtly religious language to describe their relationship to a celebrity.<sup>xxiii</sup> Erica Doss found in her research into the religious culture of Elvis Presley fans that when they were asked directly about the religious dimensions of their relationship to Elvis they were very likely to reject the idea with some vehemence.. As one fan quoted by Doss says, “Elvis did not die for our sins, nor is he Jesus Christ and it is very wrong to even try and draw comparisons.”<sup>xxiv</sup> . Very similar reactions were found in research into the Sydney-based Cliff Richard Fan Club. In this research many of the respondents identified as “devout Christians,” a trait they share with their chosen celebrity. The researcher observed that ‘Most view Cliff as human rather than god-like.’<sup>xxv</sup> These examples are significant because the fans behavior and language appears to treat their chosen celebrity as if they are of some kind of religious significance but when they are confronted with this idea they are clear that their attachment though deeply significant to them is not religious. Religion for the fan of Elvis and Cliff Richard is synonymous with traditional Christian practice and belief. This is precisely the position that Justin Bieber is advocating.

### **Parasocial relationships in Celebrity Culture**

There is a tension that runs throughout celebrity culture. This tension exists around the kind of relationships that fans feel they enjoy with their celebrities. On the one hand these relationships appear to be very real in that they can mean a great deal to individuals and to groups. They become a source of identity and common feeling. At the same time there is the obvious point that most fans have never met the person who has become the object of their devotion. The media processes that develop narratives of revelation and seeming intimacy between celebrities and fans both facilitate connection while ensuring that this connection is at a distance. This slight of hand is exaggerated with the development of social media where Twitter and Instagram appear to offer informal and immediate photographs and comment from ‘behind the scenes’. This glimpse of the personal and private made public gives heightens a key ingredient in celebrity culture; the making public of private life for the consumption of fans. This invitation into intimacy however should be tempered by the realization that these insights are being shared with seven and a half million people on twitter. Social media above all is a powerful means to generate

sales and much of the content will be in the hands of publicity agents and managers.

Media communication facilitates relationship between celebrities and fans but these relationships are circumscribed such that they are largely one way. These kinds of relationships have been described as ‘parasocial’. Ellis Cashmore sees the idea of the parasocial relationship as capturing ‘the way we think and feel about people we don’t know and who don’t know us but sometimes and unwittingly and unknowingly move us to act, occasionally in erratic and irrational ways.”<sup>xxvi</sup> For the fans, one-way parasocial interactions are experiences as significant and authentic; in fact, such interactions are so common they are hard to avoid. “Even if we wanted to insulate ourselves for a while,” says Cashmore, “we couldn’t escape over-hearing chats, glancing at newspaper or magazine covers, or resisting switching on the TV, even if only for the news.”<sup>xxvii</sup> Parasocial interactions are an intimacy that is “at a distance.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

Theories of a parasocial relationship however do not account for every aspect of the fluid and irreverent world of celebrity culture. Celebrity culture operates as a complex area where fans may in turn identify or disidentify with celebrities. Identification relates to the way that celebrities may offer significant models for lifestyle and behavior. Disidentification is the opposite. Here fans may actually disapprove of the choices made by celebrities. The irreverent dynamic in celebrity culture plays out in the way that disapproval or even disdain operate as part of the process of identity construction. Disidentification recognizes that there are deep pleasures in seeing how celebrities mess up and fail. These offer the possibility to locate an identity in opposition rather than one that is in tune with the celebrity. Disapproval is located in sensibilities that find enjoyment in not making that kind of mistake or choice. Here celebrity culture is focused on the poor decisions and wastefulness of many celebrity lifestyles. For the fan the pleasure is in realizing that with the same amount of money or fame they would not have done that particular thing or broken up with that partner, or got that drunk and been photographed. Turner calls this aspect of celebrity culture “playfulness”. He argues that the construction of identity is as much play as it is work. As he puts it, “When a women’s magazine offers it’s readers advice on how to ‘celebritize’ their wardrobe, then it is important to recognise that this offer is likely to produce a playful and imaginative form of cultural consumption.”<sup>xxix</sup> Fans have a “give and take” with a range of media figures.<sup>xxx</sup> Fans relate to celebrities by including them in the construction of “imaginary worlds.”<sup>xxxi</sup> These practices may in turn involve a rejection of the behavior or lifestyle choices of celebrities as much as admiring and choosing to follow their lead. The point is that parasocial relationships enable the freedom to disidentify as well as identify and both might operate as a means to play with the sense of self.

### **Parareligion**

Making a direct connection between religion and celebrity culture is somewhat problematic. There is something to be said for seeing the connection as being primarily semantic. This is the point that Laderman makes when he observes that, ‘Celebrity culture, the cult of celebrity, celebrity worship—these and other phrases are regularly used to capture the elusive, irreducible power of celebrity



in the present and recent past.”<sup>xxxii</sup> There are, however, significant problems with the idea that celebrity culture is actually a religion. Most approaches to religion involve at least one of the following ideas: a belief in a supernatural power, the significance of religion to generate community life or a some kind of church, or a divine power’s influence on people’s lives. Celebrity culture in almost all of these respects falls significantly short of what is required of a formal religion. Celebrity worship has no reference to a transcendent divine other. There is no regular gathering or community of celebrity worshippers, and the extent to which celebrities may or may not be a resource for meaning making is less than clear. Yet rather than dismissing celebrity worship as not religiously significant it might be possible to cast new light on how, through the action of the media, and through the agency of audiences and fans, something like (and not like) religion is starting to emerge. My term for this is parareligion.

Parareligion is based on the premise that celebrity worship is not a religion but has religious parallels. Like the concept of parasocial interaction, parareligion suggests that religious elements are present but that they are presented ambiguously. These religious elements are often contradictory and open to a variety of different understandings. Parareligion is an attempt to account for the irreverence and ambiguities that appear in celebrity culture. In celebrity worship there are moments when the sacred appears to be present, but this is often subverted or interrupted by the irreverent. In celebrity culture the sacred appears to be present, but it has somehow been (sub)merged in the profane. In popular culture the processes of representation seem to appropriate theological analogies yet are twisted and altered in the process. Articulation lifts these theological metaphors and forms of expression from their relationship to any kind of formal religious community or tradition and relocates them in a conflicted, contested, contradictory, and fluid arena of meaning making. This seems to describe a new form of religious context, but unfortunately these forms of representation and the kinds of identification that they support and elicit are all mixed up with a heavy dose of irony. So any attempt to dignify celebrity worship as religion must somehow accommodate the pervading impression that celebrity culture is somehow ephemeral and rather silly. Parareligion is an attempt to reconcile these various elements by developing a theory of a “sort of” religion.

### **Justin and the Sacred Self**

While celebrity worship may not be regarded as in any way a formal religion the relationships that fans develop with celebrities suggest a shift in the nature of the sacred in contemporary society. Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead have identified what they see as a ‘subjective turn in contemporary religion.’<sup>xxxiii</sup> This is a shift away from objective authority based religious understandings towards more personal and intimate approaches to religion. This accords with the notion that within celebrity worship there is a renegotiation of the self taking place. This renegotiation is not directly concerned with the celebrity themselves rather it arises from the way that celebrities offer versions of the self. This means that within parasocial relationships fans are choosing to identify or disidentify such that they are actively engaged in a construction of the self. It is this practice that signifies the sacred. This is a sacred however that is not located in the celebrity

themselves but in the fan. It is the fan that is seeking to make the most of themselves, and is afraid of letting themselves go. It is the fan who is working on their self-image. The celebrity in this sense is simply the focus for this personal engagement with the self. So as Rojek makes clear, 'Post-God celebrity is now one of the mainstays of organizing recognition and belonging in secular society.'<sup>xxxiv</sup>

It is the collective "us" in the celebrity that is being worshipped. So celebrities are "deities" only to the extent that they are carrying the projected identifications of fans. We are worshippers with short attention spans and a tendency toward a slightly cynical take on the characters that fill our news media. The theological metaphors and religious analogies in celebrity culture allow a glimpse into the processes of the sacralization of the self in popular culture. These metaphors and analogies are an aspect of what Turner supports this view, arguing that celebrity culture is now one of the main resources for the construction of the self: "As the media plays an ever more active role in the production of identity; as our consumption practices increasingly reflect choices that privilege the performance of identity; and as celebrity becomes an increasingly common component of media content; it is not surprising that celebrity should become one of the primary locations where the news and entertainment media participate in the construction of cultural identity."<sup>xxxv</sup>

The nature of religion is brought into focus in the encounter between the seminary students and Beliebers. The idea of parareligion could be seen as suggesting that 'real' religion rests with the traditional faith of the Lutheran Seminary. This would leave the Beliebers as somewhat mistaken and perhaps deluded. Interestingly Justin Bieber himself seems to indicate that this is not entirely true. For while the singer is clear that real religion resides with the worship of God and this religion is the only one that is to be trusted he also points to the shifting nature of the sacred in society. The song purpose makes this clear 'You're trying to be the best you can be but that's all you can do If you don't give it all you got, you're only cheating yourself'. Bieber understands that what is really at stake in celebrity worship is the sacred self.

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<sup>i</sup> (<http://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/justin-bieber-leaves-the-stage-in-rage-after-yelling-at-his-fans/a/23551961/> accessed 26/2/16.

<sup>ii</sup> Shapiro p9 -12.

<sup>iii</sup> Shapiro p12.

<sup>iv</sup> J. Newkey-Burden, C. (2010) Justin Bieber the Unauthorised Biography London Michael O'Mara Books p 161

<sup>v</sup> Justin Bieber the Unauthorised Biography p10.

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Then-I-saw-his-face-now-Im-a-Belieber-162539797089983/>

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Im-Belieber-Womens-T-Shirt-Colours/dp/B00500GGOK>

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- viii <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=se6BezB1IQo> accessed 4.3.16.
- ix <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=se6BezB1IQo> accessed 4.3.16.
- <sup>x</sup> Valerie Tweedle1 and Robert J. Smith Understanding the dynamics of emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases using mathematical models, 2011:000-000 ISBN: 978-81-7895-549-0 Editor: Steady Mushayabasa [http://storage.thoroldedition.ca/v1/suns-prod-images/file/1297270790461\\_BieberFever.pdf](http://storage.thoroldedition.ca/v1/suns-prod-images/file/1297270790461_BieberFever.pdf) accessed 3.3.16)
- <sup>xi</sup> [http://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2014/02/01/justin\\_bieber\\_are\\_you\\_still\\_a\\_belieber.html](http://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2014/02/01/justin_bieber_are_you_still_a_belieber.html) accessed 25.2.16.
- <sup>xii</sup> [http://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2014/02/01/justin\\_bieber\\_are\\_you\\_still\\_a\\_belieber.html](http://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2014/02/01/justin_bieber_are_you_still_a_belieber.html) accessed 25.2.16
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ellis Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 79.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Roland Barthes 'Mythologies' ET 1973, p57.
- <sup>xv</sup> (Malcolm Boyd 1958 *Christ and the Celebrity Gods*, p8)
- <sup>xvi</sup> Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 53.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Edgar Morin, *The Stars*, trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 57. First published 1972.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Source: <http://www.directlyrics.com/justin-bieber-purpose-lyrics.html> accessed 10.3.16
- <sup>xix</sup> <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/justin.bieber.shares.bible.devotional.o.n.how.to.worship.god.drawing.raves.from.millions.of.his.fans/78593.htm> accessed 26/2/16
- <sup>xx</sup> Newkey-Burden p 19
- <sup>xxi</sup> <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/justin.bieber.tells.fans.dont.put.your.f.aith.in.me.because.im.gonna.disappoint.you/80533.htm> accessed 26/02/16
- <sup>xxii</sup> <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/justin.bieber.tells.fans.dont.put.your.f.aith.in.me.because.im.gonna.disappoint.you/80533.htm> accessed 26/02/16
- <sup>xxiii</sup> SLyvetteRob, comment on "So Do We All Have Celebrity Worship Syndrome? Lol," The MJFC Michael Jackson Fan Club, comment posted September 2, 2009, <http://www.mjfanclub.net/mjforum373/showthread.php?t=13261>.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Quoted in Doss, *Elvis*, 73.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Caldwell and Henry, "Living," 8.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Cashmore, *Celebrity*, 39.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Cashmore, *Celebrity*, 80.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Cashmore, *Celebrity*, 80.

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<sup>xxix</sup> Turner, *Understanding*, 102.

<sup>xxx</sup> Alperstein quoted in Cashmore, *Celebrity*, 82.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Alperstein quoted in Cashmore, *Celebrity*, 82.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Laderman, *Sacred*, 71.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 2.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Chris Rojek 'Celebrity' 2001, p 58

<sup>xxxv</sup> Turner, *Understanding*, 102.